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THE BOY IN RED; or, The Czar's Masked Messenger By R. T. EMMET.



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For a moment the Czar's masked messenger was puzzled. He reined in his horse a trifle and glanced around. Just then on each side of the road he saw two huge trees, from behind the trunks of which two arms were thrust out, and in each hand there gleamed a pistol. Both weapons were pointed at the boy.

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THE BOY IN RED;

OR,

The Czar's Masked Messenger.

By R. T. EMMET,

Author of "The Mystery of the Sealed Door; or, The Oldest House in New York," etc., etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE CONSPIRACY AT THE PALACE.

It was on the night of January 1st., 18—, that a popular masquerade ball was progressing at the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, Russia.

These hops are given yearly by the Czars, and the Emperor Nicholas was there with his wife to dance the polonaise before leaving the magnificent ball-rooms to his guests.

The people thronging the palace were made up of all classes, there being no difference between the rich and poor, patrician or plebeian, and a strangely assorted crowd was dancing to the strains of a military band, everybody disguised by masks in different kinds of fancy costumes.

But in the midst of all the happy laughter, mirth, gleaming light and gliding bodies there was a scene going on in the palace of a deadly nature which none of the joyful revelers suspected for an instant.

And this is the way it was found out:

The Czar stood at one side of the ball-room when a queer-looking young chap came up to him and whispered:

"Your majesty, I was just standing over there by that door which leads into the small ante-room when I saw the chief of police go in with Ivan Stanislaus, one of his spies, and heard Peter Perowsky say: 'Ivan, you start for Siberia to-night with me, and we must ride like the wind to get away before the Czar finds out my treachery.'"

The Czar glanced at the boy in amazement, and saw that he was a strong, sturdy fellow attired in a Polish costume.

He had on a fur cap, a square cut jacket trimmed with fur, a pair of leather tights, low shoes, a fur coat, and beneath it he wore a silver belt around his waist, holding a long-bladed dagger.

But his entire costume, including the mask on his face, was of a bright red color that lent him a strange appearance.

The Czar evidently recognized him, though, by the tones of his voice.

"Ah, my young friend," said he in a whisper to the boy, "it is you, eh? I have long suspected that Peter Perowsky is not as loyal to me as he pretended to be. Ever since I set the serfs free in Russia, a great many of my people have become bitter against me. But you go over to the anteroom again, and try to find out what Perowsky means. You will find me near at hand, so you can tell me all you learn."

The boy in red bowed respectfully, and hurried away.

There was a curtain separating the anteroom from the ball-room, and he hid himself in the heavy velvet folds, slightly parted the drapery, and cautiously peered into the little apartment.

And there sat the two men of whom he had spoken to the czar beside a table, their backs turned toward him, and the lights turned so low that they looked like two shadows in the gloom.

The boy in red listened intently, and he heard them whispering, yet as he had a sharp pair of ears, it was not hard for him to hear nearly all that the two men were saying.

The chief of the police was a little old man, wearing boots, a long black coat edged with dark fur, and a round fur cap on his short-cut white hair, while the man with him was dressed the same way; but he was younger, and had dark hair and a short dark beard.

"Now I tell you, Ivan Stanislaus," the chief was saying eagerly, "I will get five million roubles for this job, if I allow the Polish exiles to escape from Tobolsk, in Siberia; but I will not receive my share of the money until the town is burned down and they get away."

"Explain the matter clearly to me, Peter Perowsky," said the police-spy, "and if I am satisfied, why, I will join you in your journey across Russia to give the Governor of Tobolsk the signal to let the conspiracy be carried out."

"Very well," replied the chief; "but this is a very dangerous place to speak of a matter which may cost us our lives."

"Oh, nobody but ourselves are in this room," said Ivan, glancing around, "and no one can be listening. Indeed, if you speak in low tones I think we are quite safe. Who would imagine that a conspiracy is going on right in the heart of the czar's palace. Oh, nobody. In fact, we are safer to speak here than anywhere else."

This answer seemed to please Perowsky, for he said:

"You are right, Ivan. People do not look for danger right under their very noses, so I will not hesitate any longer."

"If you both only knew that I am here listening to all you are saying," thought the boy in red, laughing inwardly, "you would not feel quite so sure of being safe!"

Then he heard Perowsky say:

"Here is the way the case is: I am a man who loves money better than anything in the world. Some Polish noblemen were caught stirring up a rebellion in Warsaw and were exiled to Siberia. Now, my own brother is the Governor of Tobolsk, the town in which the Polish nobles are held. They got money from their families and bribed my brother to agree to let them and a number of their friends burn down the town so that they can escape during the confusion."

"Why," said Ivan, "if they do the lives of many of the other exiles may be lost in the flames, without counting the vast loss of money which would come on the Russian Government by the destruction of the town. It is too dreadful. But how did you learn all about this conspiracy going on so many hundred of miles away?"

"My brother," replied Perowsky, with a laugh, "was afraid to allow the plot to go on. So he sent me word that if I would join him in it and look out (here in Saint Petersburg), that he was not exposed he would run the risk of allowing the Polish noblemen to do it. He said my share of the money would be five million rubles."

"A princely sum," commented Ivan.

"Indeed! I answered Paul, my brother, that I would join in the plot, and the signal for the revolt would be my arrival at Tobolsk. He and I are then to go with the conspirators to get the second half of the amount they promised us, as but one half has been paid down. I must therefore leave St. Petersburg to-morrow—ay, even to-night, as everything is in readiness to start. I do not want to go alone, as the journey must be over a thousand miles and there are no railroads. Besides, since I agreed to engage in this plot I have daily feared exposure to the Czar; such things leak out, you know, Ivan, and were I detected my life would pay for my treachery. Five millions, though, are a great temptation."

"Ah, Perowsky, but if I have my share I will go with you."

"You shall receive half a million rubles."

"Then it is a bargain. We go to-night."

"From here. It was this fear of detection that induced me to say as we came in that we ride like the wind to get away ere the Czar finds out my treachery. He may have spies watching me, and who knows but that the plot may have leaked out. If it has, I might be seized at any moment and get shot dead."

"Do you intend to come back to St. Petersburg when the deed is done?"

"Oh, no. I would not dare to, as I might be exposed. My treason consists of withholding this scheme from public notice, and not only taking no means to suppress it, but of joining in it."

"Then we will both leave Russia forever."

"Yes, Ivan, and as we have no ties to bind us here, it will not cost us any regret. I have got a spy constantly watching the emperor, unknown to him, so that at the first alarm I could have fled."

"Who in Tobolsk could stop the uprising besides the governor?"

"Why, if it was learned that such an atrocity was about to occur, the lieutenant of the troops stationed there not only could take the law into his own hands, but upon finding that my brother was one of the ring-leaders in the plot, he could even shoot the governor himself down. But when I get there, we intend to send the soldiery away on a false chase after imaginary fugitives so as to leave the town unprotected and entirely at our mercy! Oh, every point has been very carefully considered. Have no fears. We are not engaging in anything that would expose us to the risk of failure or danger of any kind."

Ivan Stanislaus was satisfied.

"Come," said he, "we will go. Whereabouts do we start from?"

"My droschky and a team awaits us on the outskirts of the city. But ere I go I must speak to the trusted men at my office."

The two men arising and coming toward the curtains behind which the boy in red was hiding, he stole away with all speed.

Hunting for the emperor in the midst of the masqueraders, he presently found him standing in one of the corridors, but he did not see a man in the costume of a devil, lurking behind a post a few yards away from the Czar.

This individual was Peter Perowsky's spy whom he had watching the Czar, and as the boy in red rushed up to the emperor, he listened to all the masked boy said.

As briefly as possible the Czar's little friend told Nicholas all about what he overheard passing between Perowsky and Stanislaus, causing the emperor to get very angry and excited.

"I must baffle this plot!" exclaimed the Czar, "and cause the arrest of the conspirators. But it can only be done in one way."

"And that?" questioned the boy.

"By your riding to Tobolsk and warning the soldiery against leaving the town, causing the arrest of the governor, and taking charge of the exiles who are plotting to escape from Siberia."

"I shall do it—I will go to-night, as Perowsky may have sent couriers ahead to start the revolt."

"Then follow me and I will have you equipped for the journey. As for Peter Perowsky and Ivan Stanislaus, I shall have them arrested and shot here in St. Petersburg before they can get away," said the Czar.

He hurried off with the boy in red, and the spy in the devil's suit came from behind the post where he had overheard all that was said, and rushed from the palace to put Perowsky on his guard against the Czar.

CHAPTER II.

ON THE ROAD TO SIBERIA.

An hour later, mounted in the saddle on a fiery black horse, the

boy in red went dashing out of the city to the eastward, launched upon his long journey.

He was enveloped in a heavy fur overcoat, armed with a brace of revolvers, had an ample supply of money, passports, and a letter to the lieutenant of the barracks at Tobolsk in the Czar's own handwriting.

The boy had not taken time to change his costume.

"In fact," said he to the Czar before he started, "I shall keep on this suit, as it is well adapted to my journey, being warm and comfortable. Nor shall I discard my mask for one important reason. If it is found out that I am your messenger along the route by any one who may chance to know me who may be in league with Perowsky, why, out of revenge upon me, they might injure those in St. Petersburg whom I love better than my own life. No, I'll keep my identity hidden."

The Czar approved of this plan, and bade him God-speed.

"You are the only one in whom I have confidence to undertake this trip," he said emotionally, "for I am surrounded by enemies on all sides and do not know a dozen people whom I would trust. Let your noble deed be well done and when you return I shall grandly reward you."

The boy needed a brave heart, for many dangers were to beset his path, and the weather was intensely cold; snow was falling steadily, and he knew well enough that when he reached the mountains in the northeast, death itself would be staring him in the face in many ways.

The horse he bestrode was the best one in the Czar's own stable, was strong, enduring and remarkably fleet.

Within a few minutes after the boy had passed the boundaries of the city he was startled by hearing several smothered pistol shots.

They came from amidst the dense veil of down-falling snowflakes, and were accompanied by the cries of men, the dull and rapid pounding of horses' hoofs, and seemed to proceed from behind the boy on the road.

His horse became startled and sprang aside, when, like a ball shot from a cannon, a droschky and team, with two men in the vehicle, went dashing by at full speed.

"Peter Perowsky—he has escaped!" gasped the boy.

The police chief and the spy saw the boy, and shook their fists at him, as if they knew that he was opposed to them.

A moment later they vanished in the mist of snow.

Then another figure burst into view.

It was a man on horseback, clutching a pistol in his hand, his body arrayed in the uniform of an imperial soldier.

On he came dashing, but as he neared the boy in red his horse slipped, fell, broke his leg, flung the rider over its head into a bank of drift snow, and laid maimed.

"Heaven!" gasped the boy, as he recognized the last man; "and here is Major Germann in pursuit of the fugitives!"

The officer saw the mounted boy, and arose, saluting him.

"God help Tobolsk!" he exclaimed, approaching.

"What is the matter, sir?" asked the little fellow.

"The Czar sent me to arrest Perowsky, as you know, but a spy of his forestalled me, giving him warning in his office that his plot was exposed to Nicholas by you, and he told Perowsky to fly for his life. I pursued him and Stanislaus, but they have, as you see, escaped my shots and gotten away."

"That is unfortunate," observed the boy.

"Very. There is now no way to capture them."

"Do they know about my mission?"

"Yes; the spy told them all."

"Then it will be a race between them and myself to Tobolsk?"

"Not only that, boy, but as they know you by your costume, and are aware that your errand is to baffle them, they will try to meet you along the route, and may kill you to prevent you thwarting them."

"Have no fears for me," said the Czar's young messenger, "I shall not be prevented from doing as I intend, for no matter what obstacles rise up to hinder me, I shall overcome them."

"Do not let your enemies get to Tobolsk ahead of you."

"To prevent it I must fly at once, for every minute is precious now. They have only got a few minutes' start of me, but the journey is long, and weeks will pass ere I reach my destination, and in the meantime I can push on ahead of them. I go. Adieu! We shall meet again, major!"

And rushing away from the soldier, who, out of mercy to his suffer-

ing horse, shot it, the boy disappeared in the track of his two flying enemies, amid the falling snowflakes.

He rode hard for an hour or more, keeping the road he had started off on, his plan being to ride all night long to get ahead of his enemies.

Ten miles further on he came to a dense growth of timber, from which the ravaging hand of winter had rent the foliage, the road winding beneath an arcade of meeting branches.

Here the downfall of snow was broken by the woodland, so that objects ahead were easily discernible, and as the boy dashed in among the trees he glanced sharply ahead, when to his surprise he saw Perowsky's droschky and team.

They were standing beside the road, the vehicle empty.

What had become of the two men?

For a moment the Czar's masked messenger was puzzled.

He reined in his horse a trifle and glanced around.

Just then on each side of the road he saw two huge trees, from behind the trunks of which two arms were thrust out, and in each hand there gleamed a pistol.

Both weapons were pointed at the boy.

He gave a convulsive start, dug his spurs in his horse's flanks, and with a neigh the beast bounded ahead, just as two sharp reports rang out and two bullets came singing past the boy's head, barely missing him.

"An ambushade!" he muttered, snapping his teeth shut hard. "They have waylaid me. I should have suspected it. Ah! I'll get the best of them for this!"

He steered his horse over to the droschky, and the moment he ranged up alongside of the waiting team, he raised the raw hide whip he carried, and brought it down upon the horses' backs twice with stinging force.

The beasts quivered under the cruel lash and reared up neighing with pain, and just as Perowsky and Stanislaus sprang from behind the trees, the horses dashed away with the droschky at full speed, leaving them no means of conveyance.

The chief and his man uttered cries of rage.

"Our horses are gone!" gasped Perowsky.

"May the fiend seize the boy!" hissed Stanislaus.

"Murderers!" cried the boy in red. "You are handicapped now."

Bang! bang! went their revolvers again, the bullets singing around the fearless boy dangerously close, and he uttered a reckless laugh and dashed away in pursuit of the droschky.

"They cannot go on now," he muttered. "Every moment gained is an advantage to me. I shall win this struggle!"

His noble steed carried him out of range of the pistols wielded by the two villains, and they stood knee deep in the snow at the roadside, glancing blankly at each other over their misfortune.

The boy in red had no time to try to capture the men, for, if in a struggle, unaided as he was, the tide of war turned against him, he would be rendered powerless, and they would go on and carry out their plot unmolested.

No, he would adopt the safest and wisest course by avoiding an encounter under all circumstances, he mentally argued, and try to reach his destination with the Czar's message, leaving others to do the fighting at the point where it was most necessary.

"Alone," he thought, "I could do but little, for while engaging one of the rascals, the others would attack me behind my back. I do not fear anything or anybody, so it is no cowardice that prompts me to go on. Oh, no. I have better chances of doing my duty by not courting a fight. In the end those fellows will bring up shot dead."

The weather was bitterly cold.

It penetrated the warm furs he wore, and it froze the snow before the feathery flakes touched the earth.

This was a source of intense uneasiness to the boy.

"Were I to become snow-bound, or my horse chilled through," he thought, with a shudder, "I might just as well bid farewell to all hope of succeeding in carrying out the emperor's orders."

He was heading for Tikhvin, in Novgorod, and within a few hours reached the town, where he paused at an inn to rest his horse.

The storm had intensified, and with his coat collar turned up to hide his masked face as well as to keep him warm, he remained at the stable door, not caring to venture inside of the tavern.

Two hours later he called the post-boy to bring out his horse, and

while the little fellow was saddling the beast, he saw Perowsky and his companion come dashing up in their droschky, which they had recovered from a peasant who had stopped the team.

"Confound my misfortune!" muttered the boy. "Here they are now, and so close at my heels that I can barely escape them."

The boy came out with his horse, and he leaped into the saddle to ride away, when his enemies saw him.

Away he dashed, but they did not pause at the tavern.

Urging the team on, they began to hotly pursue him through the blinding storm, with the hope of stopping him in his tracks.

CHAPTER III.

FROZEN IN THE ICE.

WHEN the next day dawned the boy in red was south of Lake Bielo, his persistent enemies hotly in pursuit, the snow two feet deep on the roads, and a branch of the river Volga ahead of him.

"If the stream is frozen over I am safe," he thought, "but if, on the other hand, it is not, and I find no means of crossing, I fear I may meet with a terrible misfortune."

When he came to the shore an unbroken mass of snow was stretched before him across the stream, hiding the surface from his view and leaving him in doubt whether the water was frozen hard or not. But he had to make a venture.

His enemies were within half a mile and in plain view.

Down the embankment dashed his horse, fearlessly going wherever its plucky young rider guided it, and with one leap it went flying out on the snow-covered ice.

For an instant the boy's heart seemed to cease pulsating.

He waited anxiously a moment, but the ice held firm.

Then he ventured further out and glanced back.

His enemies were in a quandary.

Their vehicle had broken down.

Not at a loss, however, they flung the harness from the horses and, simply retaining the bridles and some straps to fasten their robes on the backs of the beasts, they mounted and came on.

"The rascals mean to follow me over the river," the boy muttered. "I hope that the combined weight of their horses will carry them through the ice. There has not been much of a freeze, and the ice must be rotten— Ah!"

The ejaculation was caused by feeling his horse plunge.

Its forelegs seemed to sink deeper in the snow covering the icy crust, and there sounded a sudden boom, smothered but fearful, and the boy half arose from the saddle.

"The ice is breaking!" he muttered, aghast.

By that time he was half way across the stream, and his two enemies had reached a snowy knoll, from the top of which they looked down at him from their horses' backs.

To venture back now would simply be to throw himself in their power, while to go ahead meant a fall through the broken ice, to perhaps meet a violent death.

The perplexed boy remained where he was an instant.

"One course is no better than the other," he calculated. "I will go ahead. If I perish that way they at least will not have the satisfaction of having a hand in it."

He urged the floundering horse ahead.

It was trembling like an aspen, felt inclined to balk and turn back to the shore, which it had just left, but the boy held it on with a steady hand.

The further out on the ice it went the worse their condition became though, for not a third more of the distance had been traversed when the horse's hoofs went through one after the other.

It was with the utmost difficulty that the boy managed to extricate the poor beast, but by alighting from its back he managed to do so, and they went a little further this way.

The two men on the shore did not follow.

They remained where they were, intently watching the struggles of the boy, and were evidently discussing his trouble.

For a moment the boy imagined he was safe.

Then this cheerful thought was suddenly dispelled by his horse leaping away, the ice breaking beneath his feet, and his shoes going down in the water.

He sank to his waist through a hole in the ice, and became wedged there so that he could not move one way or the other, while his

horse, more fortunate than he, managed to reach the opposite shore, and ran up on the embankment, over the top of which it suddenly vanished.

Left alone to his fate a chill of horror passed over the boy.

"I cannot get out!" he gasped. "The cold is increasing. I will freeze up in this aperture and perish from the cold!"

He saw his enemies laughing over his plight, but they did not venture out on the ice.

Perowsky shouted something to the boy, but the strong wind carried his voice away, and only a faint sound reached him.

Then the fugitive chief and his man took turns shooting at that half of the boy's body above the level of the ice, but they did not hit him with the first two shots.

"They mean to murder me," thought the little messenger, "but I shall dupe them so that they will leave me alone!"

When the next shot came it nearly pierced his brain.

He uttered a wild cry of distress, and flinging up his hands he toppled over sidewise on the soft snow.

There he laid to all appearances a corpse.

Perowsky and his friend thought so, at all events, for after watching him for some time longer they came to the conclusion that he was dead and drove away.

The boy did not budge until long after they were gone.

It was unfortunate for himself, in fact, that he remained inactive so long, for the ice had a chance to freeze in around his body so firmly that he was held as if in a vise.

A deadly chill had stolen over him and his legs and body became numb and stiffened, while the fearful chill began to steal up into his body and pervade every nerve and muscle.

A deadly languor was stealing his senses away, too, and he fought hard to overcome it as he knew that once he should give in to the feeling he would fall asleep and die.

"Heaven help me, I fear I am doomed!" he thought.

He shook off the drowsy coma that was stealing over him, and pulled, tugged and strained to liberate himself.

It was all in vain.

The ice held on to him with a clutch from which there was no escape unaided, and then he thought of the pistol in his pocket.

"I can at least break the ice away from around my body with it," he cogitated, "and thus get free!"

He felt for it.

Then a pang of dismay assailed him, for that part of his coat in which his pocket had been was then frozen under the surface of the water, and he could not reach it.

His exertions had exhausted nearly all his strength.

A feeling of blank despair took possession of him.

"What am I to do now?" he thought.

It seemed as if he must meet his death then and there.

There was a dreary scene before him.

The river was embedded between high embankments, and beyond the ridge on either side nothing was to be seen save the far distant gray colored sky.

As far up and down the river as he could see was one unbroken stretch of pure white snow, the banks mantled with it, and not a drift breaking the even monotony.

His enemies were out of sight, and his horse gone.

He was alone.

Alone in the clutch of death.

A single friendly hand might have saved him.

But there was not bird, beast, or mortal near to do it.

He groaned aloud in agony of spirit, and keenly feeling the triumph his enemies had over him, he turned over every idea in his mind which he could think of to extricate himself from the desperate plight he was in.

Not a means presented itself to his imagination.

Suddenly he heard a faint shout in the distance sounding like the cry of a peasant calling his dog, and it was repeated over and over again at intervals, each moment growing fainter.

"Help! Help! Help!" the boy screamed, but only the hollow, mocking echoes of his own voice rebounded from shore to shore, and the tones sounded dull and hoarse to him.

Moreover, it seemed utterly impossible to any longer fight off the fearful, sleepy feeling that was creeping over him.

His head fell over—he aroused himself again with a start, and once more he heard the peasant's distant cry.

"Help! Help me," he groaned.

But his voice now scarcely arose above a husky whisper, and the numb, lifeless feeling became more intense each moment robbing him of his power to think clearly, or move an arm.

"This stupor—this languor—" he groaned. "Oh! It is fearful—fearful—fearful! Why am I tormented so? Great Heaven, if I only had the means to escape or end my life!"

He listened again for the peasant's voice, but he was becoming so stupid that he lost interest in it gradually although the distant, cheery voice rang out again and again, and then his head fell over upon his shoulder.

He tried once more to overcome the awful feeling that death was creeping upon him, but it was in vain, and he succumbed to the situation.

His senses deserted him, and his body, bent at the hips, leaned over, gradually stiffening, his eyes wide open and glaring through the holes in his red mask like fire.

A moment more and all self control was lost.

He was rapidly freezing to death.

CHAPTER IV.

A FAITHFUL DUMB FRIEND.

PETER PEROWSKY and Ivan rode on along the banks of the Volga a mile further where the stream narrowed, and knowing that it would be safe to cross there as other foot prints were to be seen in the soft carpet of snow on the ice, they went across the river.

Reaching the other side in safety, they galloped their horses toward a small village a short distance away.

"He is gone at last," said the chief of police in jubilant tones, "and now we can go on in peace, Ivan, for the czar has not let anyone else into our secret, in order to more effectually baffle us. Therefore we need not fear pursuit by anyone else."

"Your last shot killed the boy," said the spy thoughtfully.

"Ay, now, but it was truly aimed, to be sure."

"You are a magnificent shot, Perowsky."

"There is no better in this empire!"

"But the boy hitherto seemed to bear a charmed life."

"Very true, up to the moment I fired."

"Such a chase he led us! I am tired out now."

"And as I am too, we will rest in yonder village."

"Suppose we return first to the river, and find out who he is?"

"A good suggestion, Ivan, but I am too hungry just now. We will first proceed to appease our appetites, and after we bait our horses, and procure either another droschky, sledge or saddles, we will go down to the river and examine the boy. I have an idea of his identity, but may be mistaken. Still, I mean to gratify my curiosity on that point later on."

"Some one may find his body and remove him."

"Oh, no. But few people would be out in this weather. It is true that the fury of the snow-storm has spent itself so much that we can see the leaden hued sky, but the cold is so intense that people will keep indoors rather than venture out in the air, especially in the cold region of the river."

"It would not do to have his death brought home to us, Perowsky, more especially in this district, and on account of the Czar's message he carries. The paper no doubt tells of your treason. Hence your word hereabouts would be no authority, such as it was in St. Petersburg. Beware, I say, Perowsky!"

"Oh, you are a croaker, Ivan."

"Not needlessly so."

"Well, well, I'll go, but—"

"Hush! Here is a peasant."

"Ay, now, Ivan, and chasing a horse."

"The boy's horse, Perowsky, as I live!"

They reined in, and saw a clumsy peasant trying to catch the Czar's beautiful horse, the intelligent beast, evading the man at every attempt, and dashing to and from the river.

"I say, my good man!" exclaimed Perowsky, pleasantly.

"Your excellency?" said the man, pausing and touching his cap.

"Yonder horse belongs to me."

"Ah, indeed!"

"Capture it and I will pay you fifty rubles."

"You are very generous, sir. I shall do it."

"Good! Now direct us to a shelter until to-morrow."

"The small gabled house yonder is my own, and I have a stable in which you can put your horses. Make the house your house."

"That will suit me well, more especially since you will capture my horse and return it to me," said Perowsky.

He had seen what a beautiful beast it was that the boy in red had been riding, knew that it belonged to the Czar, and, coveting the handsome animal, he was anxious to get it in his own possession.

He rode on to the hut in question with his friend, and they went in and met with the peasant's wife.

Their horses were taken to the stable by one of the woman's boys and when their wants were made known to her, with true country hospitality she assigned them to a room and prepared their dinner.

It consisted of ham, cheese, sausage, black bread, and a kind of beer called *quass*, to all of which they did ample justice when the peasant entered.

The man wore a shirt and trousers of blue cloth, a caftan of brown to his knees, studded with round white metal buttons, a fur cap, and boots.

He had a long beard, a cropped head, and an honest look.

"Well, my friend, did you capture the horse?" asked Perowsky, pleasantly.

"I did, your excellency. He is now in the stable," replied the man.

Perowsky was delighted.

He handed the peasant fifty rubles.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Here is the reward I offered you."

"You are honest," said the man. "It is an intelligent horse."

"Do you think so?"

"Ah, yes. A wonderful animal, sir."

"Why, you seem to be enraptured with it."

"I have cause to be when I think of what it did."

"And what, pray, was that?"

"Why, sir, it kept running to and from the river, you observed?"

"Yes, to evade capture, I presume?"

"No, the wise beast had an object in its queer actions."

"That is strange. Did you fathom it?"

"After awhile I found that it wanted to coax me to the river side."

"Indeed!"

"To show me a youth imbedded in the ice."

"Pasiluschil!" exclaimed Perowsky, with a violent start.

"The boy in red!" added Stanislaus, springing to his feet.

"Why, what emotion you gentlemen show," said the peasant.

The two men saw how surprised his look was, and instantly recollecting themselves, they calmed their agitation.

"The boy was dead, wasn't he?" asked Perowsky.

"Nearly so," replied the peasant. "I extricated him from the ice. He must have fallen through. Buried up to his waist, he had succumbed to freezing, and was nearly gone when I found him."

"Frozen?" eagerly demanded Perowsky.

"There was nothing else the matter with him, sir."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive!"

"Then," thought Perowsky, "my bullet missed him after all."

"Do you gentlemen know him?" asked the peasant.

"We saw him there," evasively replied Stanislaus.

"And left him to his fate?" queried the peasant with a frown.

"Oh, we imagined he was dead."

"He looked as if he were," the man exclaimed. "But I saved his life with the contents of my brandy canteen. It was all owing to the intelligence of that horse. The noble beast knew that the boy was fastened in the ice, for it led me directly to him, stood quietly by while I was rescuing him, and evinced a positive joy when the boy was saved. After that it tamely trotted all the way here, as I carried the boy to my barn, keeping beside me without the least fear, and sniffing occasionally at the boy as I walked along."

"Remarkable," said Perowsky, glancing covertly at his friend.

"It looked very much to me as if the boy and the horse were the best of friends," said the peasant meaningly.

"Impossible," said the police chief. "They never met before. But you say you have left the boy in the barn?"

"Lying on the hay, recovering under a good rubbing I gave him."

"Did you notice anything peculiar about him?"

"You mean his red clothing——"

"And his masked face."

"Yes, sir. But I did not remove the mask. The boy, no doubt, has been to a masquerade, and returning home across the country under the influence of drink, got caught in his unlucky position."

"You didn't even glance at him?"

"No. I hurried in to get more liquor for him."

"Let us go out and see who he is," said Perowsky.

The others assenting, they left the house together, and went out to the barn, the door of which stood open.

The two horses belonging to Perowsky stood in separate stalls munching some hay, and the two men glanced around in quest of the boy in red.

"Why, I see no signs of the horse or boy," said Perowsky.

"But," said the peasant, "I left them in here."

"They are both gone now."

"Then the boy must have recovered and stolen your horse."

Just then a shadow slanted in the doorway.

The men glanced up, and saw the czar's masked messenger.

He looked as if he was weak, for he held on to the door-jam for support, but there was a bright glitter in his eyes as he fastened them upon his enemies.

The men started, and took a step toward him.

"He has been hiding behind the barn," said Perowsky.

Before they could reach the door, it was slammed shut in their faces, and they heard the boy fasten the huge padlock.

They were imprisoned in the barn now, for no means of exit were to be seen except the door.

Perowsky uttered a cry of rage and rushed at the door, but it was too strong to break down, and he heard the boy ride away a moment later, without uttering a word.

The three men shouted and clamored, and in the course of half an hour the peasant's wife overheard them and let them out, but the boy in red was gone.

He had made good his escape.

CHAPTER V.

A GOOD PRIEST.

Two days later the Czar's beautiful black horse dashed into the town of Kadnikov, with a half insensible rider clinging to its back.

The sun had gone down on a clear day, a cold, raw wind was blowing, and as the horse and its rider came flying into the town a priest was crossing the road directly in their path.

The holy man accelerated his pace to get out of the beast's way when he suddenly stumbled and fell prostrate.

A shout of alarm arose from a group of on-lookers, for it seemed as if the steel-shod hoofs would come down upon the priest, as the horse was rearing up over him.

The plunging of the horse threw its rider.

As the boy fell from its back the knowing beast leaped over the recumbent form of the priest without touching him, wheeled around, cantered over to the boy in red and stood beside him, rubbing its muzzle against the little fellow's body.

"Heaven defend me, but what is this?" cried the priest, arising.

"Are you hurt, father?" asked one of the men.

"No—but see how the beast loves its master!"

"Who is he?" cried a man. "See—he wears a mask!"

"Save me!" gasped the boy, whose senses were nearly gone.

"Take off that ugly mask!" said the priest.

"No, no! Let it be, I pray you, in the Czar's name?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I am his emissary. Look—I wear his signet ring!"

The boy held it up and the priest eagerly examined it.

"You speak truly," he said, in grave tones. "But what means this?"

"I am the Czar's messenger."

"Ah!"

The boy glanced back in the direction he came from and saw Perowsky and Stanislaus coming at a furious gallop.

"My enemies!" he gasped, pointing at them.

He tried hard to overcome the faint feeling assailing him but it was of no avail, and he relapsed into senselessness.

Up dashed Perowsky and his accomplice.

"Arrest that boy!" the fugitive chief cried, pointing at the little fellow.

"What has he done?" queried a villager.

"Stolen my horse!"

"Who are you?"

"The chief of the St. Petersburg police, Peter Perowsky."

His name acted like magic, as the man was known all through Russia, and the crowd closed in around the boy.

For an instant the priest glanced at Perowsky, and then he placed himself beside the boy, held up his hand and facing the crowd, he cried in angry tones:

"Stand back!"

"How dare you defend that boy?" cried Perowsky. "We have pursued him two days now, and keeping him constantly in the saddle without food and water in order to exhaust him, we have run him down at last, and won't be thwarted."

"The boy is under my protection," stoutly asserted the priest.

"Dare you disobey the Czar's orders?" harshly asked Perowsky.

"I dare do anything. My holy office protects me."

"Then, by Heaven, you will rue this interference!"

"Beware how you threaten a priest!"

"Well, you shall not balk me! Stanislaus, shoot the boy."

The spy pulled out his pistol and aimed it at the little fellow, when the priest intervened his body between the man and his intended victim, exclaiming:

"You shall have to kill me first!"

"Why do you betray such an interest in this boy?" asked Perowsky.

"Because he is a messenger of the Czar. He wears the emperor's signet ring. You men respect nothing—not even a priest, and I therefore distrust you. I shall protect this boy with my life. Begone, ere I call down the curses of the holy church upon you. Begone, I say, else you will regret it."

"Not an inch!" roared Perowsky. "Not until I have punished that young impostor! You people will suffer for this. In the name of the law I call upon you citizens to aid me to carry out our master's orders."

Not a man stirred.

In Russia the people only recognize one fact—duty!

But the influence of the church is one of the greatest powers.

The priest smiled.

"You have failed!" he exclaimed.

"Then unaided I shall do as I intend," cried Perowsky.

He steered his horse to ride down the brave priest, but not two steps had his beast taken when, with a roar, the enraged on-lookers rushed in a body toward Perowsky.

He saw his danger when too late.

The angry people armed themselves with sticks and stones and began to pelt the chief and his spy unmercifully.

Alarmed, the two men turned their horses and dashed madly away, pursued by the crowd, hooting and yelling, while a shower of missiles struck the two men and goaded their horses to the top of their speed.

They were driven out of the town, and were glad enough to escape into the country with their lives.

The priest had the boy carried into the near-by church, and sent for a physician, who found the little messenger in a bad state of health, which nothing but rest and care would recuperate.

Here revived the boy, and he was taken to the priest's house, where the holy man was told the story of his adventures, and the reason he was there.

It was quite enough to enlist the priest's sympathy.

"You need have no fears, you are safe here," said he. "Recover your strength and then you can go on."

"No," said the boy. "It will give my enemies a start and a lead, which I may find hard to recover."

"Without health and strength you can do nothing."

"That is true," said the boy with a sigh.

He was forced to spend two days there. His horse was well taken care of, and the priest told him that he could get a boat on the following day which would come from Lake Kubinsk, and carry him as far as Soluitchegodsk on the Suchona river, which was open for navigation.

This was good news, as it would save him many hard days' riding,

bring him into Valogda, and complete half the distance of his journey across the interior toward the Ural mountains.

Moreover, he had been suffering privations during the last three days that threatened to overwhelm him, and the boat ride would give him a good opportunity to recover from his exhaustion.

The freezing he had undergone had affected him badly, but not seriously, and under the care of the physician he was almost over the evil effect of it when the next day arrived.

The boat was a flat bottomed affair, with one wheel in back, and carried nothing but freight, but the priest found that the captain was ready to take the boy and his horse if he was paid for it; so the little fellow went on board with his horse, bade the good priest adieu, and the boat started.

There was a large cabin amidships, and several state-rooms, into one of which the boy was put, while his horse was blanketed out on deck.

All night the boat went on its way along the winding river, and the boy sought repose in his state-room, as he had no desire to have anything to say to any of the boatmen.

Just before daylight he was awakened by the boat stopping.

He arose, and glanced out a window to see where he was, but saw no landing place as he expected to.

"This is strange," he muttered. "Why have they stopped?"

The murmur of voices out on deck reached his ears, but he could not distinguish what was being said, and came to the conclusion that the boat had met with an accident.

Just then he heard the word "Tolma," saw lights gleaming far astern, and knew that they must have passed the city in question while he was sleeping.

The boat went on presently, allaying his fears, as he turned in again, and soon fell asleep.

Within half an hour a face was pressed against the glass at his window, a pair of keen eyes peering in at him.

It was Peter Perowsky outside the casement.

Beside him stood Stanislaus.

"There he is—fast asleep," said the former.

"How fortunate we just got on board this boat," replied the spy. "He is in our power once more."

"And shall not leave this boat alive!" hissed Perowsky, with an evil scowl. "The moment I saw his horse on deck I knew he was in there, and my heart fairly bounded with delight. He shall pay dearly for what we suffered at the hands of the people of Kadnikov. Remain here and keep guard while I go in, and, before I have done with him, this knife blade shall be buried in his body so deep that he will never take it out again. We can fling his corpse through this window into the river afterwards where all trace of the deed will be lost!"

The boy was calmly sleeping when his room door was softly opened, and, clutching a dagger in his hand, Peter Perowsky stole in and bent over him.

CHAPTER VI.

HUNTED DOWN.

IGNORANT of the danger he was in, the boy slept on, and Peter Perowsky arose to his full height, with the gleaming knife poised in the air.

No one but the spy, Ivan Stanislaus, was watching him.

He was upon the point of stabbing the sleeping messenger when he suddenly became filled with curiosity to see who the boy was.

For an instant he hesitated; then he lowered the knife.

"I cannot lose the opportunity," he muttered. "The boy is completely in my power. He cannot escape me. I could kill him with one blow even were anybody to come in here. I will see who he is, take the Czar's message and signet ring from his corpse, and fling him into the river. He has as many lives as a cat, but now his consummate good luck must desert him, for there is no power to prevent me ridding myself of him!"

He bent over the boy, and seized the edge of his red mask.

One movement of his hand would betray the young courier's identity.

It was not then to be.

The captain came in just then.

"Murder!" he exclaimed, catching sight of Perowsky's dagger.

The chief lost control of himself he was so startled, uttered a cry,

and releasing the mask he started back, hastily thrusting the dagger up his sleeve to conceal it.

"Ah, captain," said he, with a bland smile, instantly recovering himself when he saw who it was that had spoken. "You, eh?"

"What are you doing in this boy's room?" bluntly asked the captain.

"Nothing in particular," was the cool reply.

"Ah, but you have a dagger concealed up your sleeve."

"Have I? Well, is there anything in that?"

"A suspicious circumstance, sir, since you were bending over that boy with it in your hand when I just entered."

"Well, it certainly must have looked strange, captain," was Perowsky's cool reply; "yet I can easily explain the matter."

"I beg of you to do so, or else I shall regard you with grave suspicion."

"In a word then, captain, I was about to stab this boy."

"What—murder him—and you boldly confess it to me?"

"Exactly. I was about to kill him."

"But——"

"No words, captain, until you know that I am the chief of the St. Petersburg police, and as this mysterious fellow is my prey for a grave offense, I will do as I please in the matter. He has so often escaped me before that I now mean to make sure——"

"Stop! I know you now," said the captain, pulling a pistol out of his pocket, and surprising Perowsky by aiming it at his head.

"What do you mean by threatening me this way?" faltered the fugitive chief, recoiling, and turning very pale.

"I will blow your accursed head off!" said the captain, bluntly.

"Mercy! Have you no regard for my position?"

"As chief of the police, you are a fugitive. The good priest in Kadnikov told me this boy's history, and asked me to protect him as he is the czar's messenger. I mean to do so. Your rascality is no secret to me! Now go down on your knees before I fire!"

Perowsky made a motion to Stanislaus who was looking in the window, and the boy in red started up, aroused by their voices.

One glance showed him the whole situation.

"Perowsky!" he muttered, springing out of bed.

He had his clothing on, and saw Stanislaus aiming a revolver in the window at the boatman.

Before the spy could fire, the boy extinguished the light leaving the room in darkness, so that Stanislaus would be afraid to shoot at random, for fear of hitting his chief.

"Fire at him, captain!" he cried. "He is a traitor to the czar!"

Bang! went the boatman's pistol, there came a yell of pain from Perowsky, and he staggered out the door on deck.

"Ivan! We are betrayed! Fly for your life!" he yelled.

There was a cut on his forehead made by the bullet from the captain's pistol, and he rushed to the side, just as his friend came from behind the cabin at a run.

Several of the sailors came hurrying aft to find out what the cause of the trouble was; but before the captain could emerge from the cabin, Stanislaus loosened their horses, and mounting his own, he bade Perowsky take the other.

"Overboard—quick!" he shouted excitedly. "It is our only salvation."

"We will freeze!" gasped Perowsky.

They did not hesitate though, but sent their horses through an open gangway, down into the water, and headed the swimming beasts toward the shore.

This river was not frozen over, on account of the ice being broken by the boats that passed to and fro, but the water was covered with the frozen particles, and a fearful chill passed over the escaping men and their beasts as they made for the shore.

It was not far distant to the embankment, and they reached it by the time the boy in red and the captain had come on deck and saw them.

Once on shore, they drove away, but not before the captain of the boat had sent several harmless shots after them.

"They are gone!" exclaimed the young messenger.

"The villains lost not an instant!" replied the captain.

"But how did they get on board, sir?"

"Why, they hailed me from the shore, beyond Tolma, and paid me well to transport them. I had no idea that they were the very men

whom the holy father warned me against, until I saw one of them attempting to take your life."

"Then that was why the boat stopped?"

"Only to take the men on board."

"I hope I am well rid of them, and cannot express my intense gratitude to you," said the boy.

When daylight came the boat stopped at Usting Veliki, where the Louza river branches eastward from the Suchona, and having taken on more freight the boat proceeded on to the fork of the Dwina river.

It was there that the boy expected to get another boat which might carry him as far as Ust Sysolsk, in the neighborhood of the district of Perm; but they learned that the eastern branch of the Dwina was frozen so badly that navigation was utterly impossible.

It was a sad disappointment to the boy.

He had thus far gained over 500 miles of his journey, but he had yet to complete 800 miles more over the worst part of the route.

Still he did not utter a word of complaint.

Couriers of the Czar never do.

If they have an arduous task to perform physical suffering is the last thing to be considered, the grand aim being to do the work required, if the messenger has to fight off death and expire as soon as a message is delivered.

The Czar's coachman lives like a lord when he is not driving his noble master, but at the merest word he plants himself on his box, and with rigid foot and outstretched arms, without sleep, pause or food, in mild or stormy weather, or with the thermometer below zero, he drives 726 1-2 versts to Moscow without leaving his box.

Generally he is lifted off frozen stiff, his eyes starting and life most gone, but the 685 miles are done and his master's command fulfilled.

There are also messengers who travel to Port Saint Peter and Saint Paul, 12,800 versts from St. Petersburg, forbidden while on Russian ground to sleep under pain of dismissal, and considering a britschka (carriage) a luxury. These men have often been unable to deliver dispatches. They are taken from the courier, for he lays a corpse.

That is Russian fidelity to duty.

When the boat finally reached Soluitchegodsk, the little messenger and his horse went ashore, and as soon as the boy could get into the saddle, he drove away like the wind, enervated, refreshed as well.

"I have far outstripped Perowsky now," he muttered, as he spun along a bleak and icy road toward Fominskaya to the northward, "and if I meet with no worse delays than I have had, I shall expect to reach Siberia far ahead of the rascals."

Unfortunately, though, the boy did not think that other boats on the river he had come up could carry his enemies close after him.

Indeed the two men having secured passage in a similar freight boat, landed in the town which the boy had left, within a few hours after he had gone, and with but little trouble discovered in which direction he had gone.

It was easy for two such able detectives as they were to keep on the boy's track, especially as he was to be so easily identified by his costume.

The little fellow skirted the town and came out on the north side, though in anticipation of pursuit, and did not draw rein until he arrived at a small village, several miles beyond Fominskaya.

There was but one public house in the place, and thither he went, his face concealed under his cap and in his upturned coat collar.

He put his horse away and sought a secluded corner in the dim tap-room, in which were a large number of men, ordered a supper, and when it was served he pitched in to appease his sharp appetite.

Hardly had he concluded the repast though, when three men came in, two of whom he recognized as his enemies, but the third was a stranger.

"The chief magistrate!" said one of the by-standers. "What has happened?"

"A ukase, gentlemen," said Perowsky, glancing around. "I was sent here with it by the Czar, and the public notice is for the arrest of a boy in red, whom I have hunted here from St. Petersburg. The chief magistrate will read the order to you."

"Treachery!" thought the little messenger, with a convulsive start. "He has written it himself in order to entrap me!"

CHAPTER VII.

BESET BY WOLVES.

PEROWSKY and his companion had not yet seen the little fellow crouching in the corner, and the crowd of men in the room gathered around the magistrate to hear the notice read.

It was concise, and couched in these terms:

"Article No. 75, 827. Be it known to all persons present that the signet ring of the illustrious emperor having been stolen, all people are warned to capture the thief and hand him over to the nearest schasneprice (police commissary) for punishment."

A detailed description of the boy in red followed.

There was a wily look on Perowsky's face as he watched the landlord, saw him start, turn pale, and heard him cry:

"Why, the person you look for is here now!"

"Exposed! betrayed!" gasped the little messenger.

A general murmur ran around from mouth to mouth, each man darting a keen glance at his neighbor to see if he was the accused person.

"Here—in this hostelry?" demanded the magistrate.

"Ay, and he is now eating his supper."

"Whereabouts?" demanded Perowsky eagerly, as he looked around.

"Over in that corner," replied the landlord, pointing.

The crowd parted right and left, the fugitive chief of police glanced in the direction indicated, and there he saw the boy calmly finishing his meal as if nothing was going on.

"I recognize him! Arrest him!" cried Perowsky.

The boy did not even look up.

He wiped his mouth on a napkin, laid it down, and was just about to move back from the table when the chief magistrate stepped up and tapped him on the arm.

"You are my prisoner!" he exclaimed.

"Indeed?" was the quiet reply. "On what charge?"

"Did you hear this ukase read?"

"Yes."

"Then I need say no more than that you are the person wanted."

"Who gave you that paper?"

"This man."

"He is a fugitive from the law!"

"Eh? oh, come!"

"The paper is a forgery of his own."

"Bah! You cannot escape that way."

"I am not trying to escape anything."

"Then come and stand your trial."

"First read this document."

He handed over the Czar's passport and added:

"You gentlemen in this room will oblige me by surrounding those two men, so that they cannot escape."

Not knowing but what the boy might be innocent, the men grouped around Perowsky and the spy, much to their chagrin and rage, while the magistrate was reading the paper.

Within a moment the passport was read.

"Why, it is signed and sealed by the Czar," said the man.

"Compare it with the worthless paper these two rogues have given you," said the boy. "You will find then that their document is a forgery, invented to get me in trouble."

"You are the Czar's messenger?"

"As you can see."

"These papers have dissimilar signatures."

"Then you see that I am no impostor."

"Truly enough. I shall arrest these men!"

The boy had turned the tables again on his enemies.

Perowsky and his companion in crime would have made a fight of it had there been any apparent chance to succeed; but as the case then stood, they had to submit to arrest.

The chief magistrate then gave the boy his passport back.

"You must pardon me," he said, apologetically. "I did not know that you was a messenger of the Czar's. Come to my house, and make it your home until you go on to Siberia."

"No, I must leave here to-night."

"And these two men?"

"Send them to St. Petersburg, strongly guarded, at once."

"It shall be done. What can I do for you?"

"Nothing at all. Listen, and I'll tell you about these two men."

He then related to the astonished people all that Perowsky had done, and when he finished his recital, the justice congratulated himself that he had escaped the wrath of his emperor, by finding out the real truth in good season.

The two prisoners were taken away, cursing their misfortune, and before the dawn of the next day the Czar's messenger was in the saddle again, pushing on for Zagvardin.

It was fully eighty miles away, and the roads in bad condition, but he did not pay any attention to that, as every stage of his journey completed meant so much the less travel to be done in future.

Assured now that he would receive no further molestation from his malignant enemy, he went on with increased courage.

By the fall of the following night he arrived at a desolate stretch of barren heather and rocks which rolled away for miles and miles in a dreary waste covered with snow.

The cold was bitter, his horse was jaded by the long distance and hard usage it had experienced, and his food was most all gone from the pouch he carried fastened to the saddle-pommel.

The boy had made forty miles that day, and was keeping a sharp look-out for a place to rest himself and his faithful beast, when his glance fell upon a dilapidated old hut standing back from the road.

It had a forlorn and deserted appearance.

The door hung on one hinge, the windows were all broken, and part of the roof was caved in, but he saw that it would afford some shelter for himself and his horse, and that was all he wanted.

The moon was riding full and brilliant in the blue dome of space, and myriads of stars glittered coldly down through the rare air, while over the heather the wind went moaning in plaintive tones quite mournful to hear.

The boy steered his horse for the hut, and just had arrived at the door when he saw the skeleton of a beast lying half buried in the snow close to the building.

It looked like the remains of a cow.

"Wolves have been here lately," he muttered. "This is a bad region, and as the winter is severe the beasts must be gaunt and ravenous. I am glad I have found this shelter. An attack from the wolves would be death to me now as tired as I and my horse are."

He drove the tired beast into the hut, and finding two rooms on the ground floor, he put the animal in one, gave it the small allowance of corn he carried, and closing the door he sat down on a log near the window to eat his own supper.

There was not much to be eaten, but what there was tasted good to the hungry boy and did not remain uneaten long.

He sat for some time glancing out the window in a thoughtful mood, and then looked around the room.

There was not an article of furniture in the place, and the ceiling was badly broken and caving in.

"A miserable place in which to make my bed," he muttered. "I'd rather sleep with my horse. If that beam was to fall down in the night on me I would be crushed."

It was a large heavy joist hanging down, and he reached up and catching hold he gave it a pull.

There sounded a grinding crash, and he just had time to spring aside, when in a deluge of plaster, the entire ceiling and roof came down on him.

Some of the beams striking the floor crashed through into the ice cellar beneath, while several more barely missed breaking the boy's head as he jumped over to one side.

As it was, one of his legs went down through a hole in the floor made by one of the fallen timbers, and a network of boards and plaster coming down on top of his head held him down to the floor.

He was stunned and confused, ached, and could hardly breathe for a moment, but when he recovered himself he made an effort to free himself from the fallen debris.

It was almost impossible to get out unless he gradually dug himself free, he found to his disgust, but he set to work at once, and began to throw the rubbish aside so he could get his leg out of the hole in the floor, after which the rest would be easy.

An hour passed by, and he was working hard, when suddenly there sounded a distant howl—then another—another—and—

"Wolves!" he gasped. "They have scented me here. If I am caught in this position they will devour me alive as I am helpless yet."

He worked harder, but that chorus of mournful howls came nearer

and nearer each moment until at last they were just outside the hut, and he saw the grim beasts in the doorway.

Lean and ugly, with famished bodies, glaring eyes, gnashing teeth, and long tongues lolling from their gaping mouths, there were fully fifty of the ravenous creatures.

They crowded in at the door and at the broken windows yelping, snarling, growling and howling, snapping their teeth, and glaring at the pinioned boy as if anxious to tear him to pieces.

"Great Heaven! I am not half free yet, and they will devour me alive!" the boy groaned, as he eyed the hungry pack.

CHAPTER VIII.

ALL NIGHT ON A WALL.

RUSSIAN wolves in a hard winter are veritable cannibals, for with the land covered with snow, and their natural prey gone, they have a hard time of it to appease their hunger.

In this state they do not hesitate to attack anything upon which they can satisfy their voracity, and the boy knew it.

He kept on trying to remove the heavy timbers and the dense heap of rubbish which had fallen all around his body, in the meantime keeping a sharp watch upon the ravenous beasts.

"It is fortunate for my poor horse that he is safely shut up in the adjoining room where they cannot get at him," the boy thought, "or the hungry pack would attack him before they would go for me. Ah—here goes the heaviest log!"

He flung it aside, and was thus enabled to withdraw his leg from the hole down through which it had gone in the floor.

He was just in time, for the wolves advanced into the room by that time, emboldened by his inaction toward them.

There were at least a dozen around him then, and he pulled out a pistol and fired several shots in their midst.

Uttering the wildest howls they leaped back, leaving several of their number lying dead upon the floor and bolted for the door.

"That will scare them off for awhile!" the boy muttered.

He then had a chance to work himself entirely free, and had just extricated himself from the hole, when the beasts came back and entered the room again.

The boy glanced at his revolver.

It was the only weapon except the dagger that he had, and there only remained three more cartridges in the chambers.

He felt in his pockets for more, but suddenly remembered that the rest of his ammunition and his other pistol was in the pouch fastened to his saddle, in the room with his horse.

A feeling of blank dismay stole over him.

Then he muttered:

"What am I to do now, with all my shots gone but these?"

It was a dozen paces to the door leading into the room in which his horse was stabled, and several of the wolves were slinking between the boy and the door.

He must get in the room, over the fallen heap of rubbish, if he could, yet there was another chance against him doing it, as the door opened outward into the room he was then in, and the greatest amount of the rubbish had fallen against it, so that it would be hard to open it.

He aimed at the wolves which were between himself and the door, and fired the remaining shots with deadly effect.

Three of the lean beasts fell over dead, and the rest scattered right and left snarling and howling.

The boy dashed over to the door.

But as quick as a flash the wolves behind him came leaping after him, and by the time he had reached the partition they were snarling at his heels.

He glanced back, and tried to force the door open.

It would not move.

The heap of rubbish held it fast.

He could not get into the other room that way just then, but he remembered that there was a window in back by means of which he could enter.

To do so, he would have to go through the whole pack of wolves though, and that meant certain death.

He felt a sharp pain in the calf of his leg.

One of the most daring of the beasts had seized him, sinking its fangs in his flesh, his baleful eyes glaring madly as the boy's blood trickled on its tongue.

He pulled out his dagger, bent over, and plunged it into the wolf, causing it to release him.

It ran back howling, and the boy dashed after it with his knife raised, his sudden onslaught surprising the rest so that they fled from the room again.

The outer door only hung on one hinge, but he pulled it shut, and it held so that no more of the beasts could get in that way.

It was impossible to close the window.

But he saw that he could climb up to the broken roof, and once on top of one of the four walls, he would be safe.

There was no trouble to do it either, the window casing and protruding beams above it affording a stanch foothold, and he passed through the broken ceiling and straddled one of the walls.

He was then entirely out of the reach of his enemies.

The boy glanced around with extreme satisfaction.

The full silvery moon was smiling down from a clear blue sky upon the snowy landscape, lighting it up as if by day.

All over the heather was barren of trees and shrubs, only the lonely hut standing there back from the road.

But all around the hovel was a circle of wolves, sitting on their haunches staring up at the boy, their long red tongues lolling out, their bushy tails curved, their red eyes flaming, and howl after howl pealing from their throats.

They presently arose and began to circle around and around the hut, gradually drawing in nearer each moment, until at last they were close up to the walls.

Then they attempted to reach the boy by jumping up.

It was impossible.

He was safely out of their reach.

All night long they persisted in their efforts and failed, the boy grimly watching them, jeering at them, and fighting against a fearful drowsiness that threatened to set him asleep.

It was the extreme cold that was working on him.

Inactively sitting there his blood did not circulate as vigorously as it should have done, and he became chilled and numb.

"This will never do," he thought, uneasily. "If once I give in to the fearful coma that is stealing over me I shall asleep and perish. I must arouse myself—move myself!"

He shook off the drowsy spell, and worked his arms and legs so that by the time day dawned he felt like himself again.

The sun came up.

A magical change swept over the scene.

The wolves crept away from the spot one by one with a sneaking, whipped air, and sought hiding-places in the distant woods, as they always do in daylight.

Then the tired and sleepy boy descended from his cold perch and forced his way into the room where his horse was.

The beast was lying down, and the boy laid his head upon its neck after securing the door, and fell asleep.

He was worn out with his night watch.

It was nearly noon-time when he aroused himself, and found his horse wide awake; but the faithful beast, realizing that its master's comfort depended upon its remaining passive, had lain quite still all the while, so as not to disturb the boy.

He petted the noble beast when he got up, and leading it from the house he mounted the saddle and drove away.

Both the boy and his mount were hungry, and a sharp lookout was kept all the afternoon along the road for a farm-house wherein they could break their fast.

Luckily one was found where provisions were procured, and a sufficient supply bought to last until they should reach their next stopping-place.

The boy's money hushed all comment on his strange appearance, but the farmer and his family wondered at it greatly, as was amply evinced by the looks on their faces.

Then the boy went on again for Zagvardin.

He reached the outskirts of the town at midnight, the road going by a steep cliff, bordered by a woods, when a man stepped out in the road.

He had long white hair, a long white beard, his body was enveloped in a brown, cowled gown, and the pointed cap was on his head.

He walked with a faltering step and carried a cane.

"A priest," muttered the boy.

It is a curious but true custom of the Russians to spit whenever they meet a priest, and to cross themselves when they pass a church. The boy in red did not spit. He stood in his place, in surprise, and the old priest asked: "Are you going to Zagvardin?" "Yes, holy father," replied the boy. "It is yet a mile away, and I am benighted. Ride me there." "Your horse," said the boy, "is tired. I will walk. You take my

"Thank you, my son. May Heaven bless you." The boy alighted, and going to the horse's head he held it still while the old fellow put a foot in the stirrup and sprang into the saddle with such amazing agility as to attract the boy's attention. "Fool," muttered the little messenger. His suspicion of the priest was aroused, and he glanced at him quickly, and observed, where the skirt of his gown was raised, that he wore a pair of military pants. The priest uttered a harsh laugh, as he gathered up the reins, and the boy glanced up at him he saw the white hair and beard come out from under a pistol in the alleged priest's hand. "Who are you, Stanislaus?" gasped the boy, recognizing the other. "I am a police spy," replied the police spy, for he it certainly was. "I have deceived you. And now you may say your prayers, for I am going to run you down in your tracks."

CHAPTER IX.

PUTTING A BAD MAN OUT OF THE WAY.

Czar's masked messenger held up his hand. "Stop!" he exclaimed. "Do not shoot me yet." "What do you want now?" growled Stanislaus. "I kept my revolver pointed at the boy as he bestrode the horse, and he looked as if he was impatient to get away. "Tell me how you escaped the authorities?" said the boy. "I see no harm in that," laughed the spy. "On the way to jail I met the tavern Perowsky and I shot our captors and fled." "Where is Perowsky now?" "He has gone on to Zagvardin." "Disguised as you are?" "Precisely. We stole these habits from two traveling priests to save ourselves, as we feared pursuit. Deeming it prudent to go alone and enter Zagvardin singly, we did so, and I was just about to follow in Perowsky's track when I saw you." The boy was disgusted. "Thinking that he was rid of his enemies forever, this encounter ended the happy delusion and filled him with dismay. His fertile brain began to work at solving the problem of how to avoid being shot by Ivan, as the man evidently meant to kill him. "Hold up your hands!" cried the police spy. "What for?" "Because you cannot draw a weapon." The boy did so, and Ivan aimed at his heart. "Before he could fire the boy whistled to the horse, and the beast suddenly wheeled around and dashed toward him, just as Ivan pressed the trigger of his pistol. The rascal's aim was spoiled, for the bullet whistled harmlessly over the boy's head, and before the man could get aim at him again the boy drew his own weapon out, covered his enemy, and fired a shot. "Order!" yelled Ivan. "I'm shot!" "Get down!" shouted the boy. "Yes, yes!" gasped the man, flinging himself from the saddle. "Throw down your pistol!" commanded the boy. "Here it is," hastily groaned the spy, doing as he was told. "Take off that robe," was the next order. "It is done," said Stanislaus, disrobing and dropping it. "Now fall on your knees, Ivan, and pray." "What for?" "I am going to shoot you!" "Mercy! Mercy!" "No, indeed. You had none on me." "Spare my life, I beseech you!" "All your prayers and entreaties are in vain." "Then I'll run!" panted the man. He clutched his arm, which had been wounded, and dashed away.

The boy fired a shot after him, and then pursued him among the trees, leaving the horse standing in the road. Stanislaus did not go far before he saw the cliff top ahead of him. "To go over the edge, down into that yawning gulf, means destruction!" he gasped, as he came to a sudden pause. He was desperate as he faced the boy, who just then came up to him, and the little messenger saw what occasioned his alarm in an instant. "You are cornered!" the boy exclaimed jubilantly. "For Heaven's sake forgive me!" groaned the wretched man. "No; I cannot. You have done me too much injury." "Then do what you will, only spare my life." "I shall make a prisoner of you and take you to Zagvardin." "Anything—anything but death." "Drop down on your knees so I can bind your arms." The man complied, and the boy pulled out his handkerchief. As he did so he observed that the treacherous spy had a long-bladed knife thrust in his belt, incased in a sheath. "Hand me that dagger," exclaimed the boy. Ivan started apprehensively and pulled the weapon out. The boy was just reaching for it when the spy drew back his arm suddenly and aimed a vicious blow at the messenger with the knife, but the boy darted back out of the way in time to escape it. Ivan sprang to his feet. "You shall not have it all your own way!" he cried hoarsely. Before the boy could use his pistol the man knocked it from his hand, but the next instant the little messenger had his own dagger clutched in his fist, and parried another stab which the desperate spy aimed at his heart. "A fight!" the boy panted. "To the death!" hissed Stanislaus. "You will fall then," said the boy grimly. "We shall see. On guard!" The man rushed at him, imagining that his superior strength, long reach and skill would overwhelm his little antagonist. But he reckoned without his host. The boy was light, agile and more skillful than he was. With a slash the two knife blades met, emitting sparks, and to Ivan's surprise he found himself driven back step by step before the rapid blows of the boy. The spy fought dexterously, but the best he could do was to prevent himself being stabbed to death. He glanced in amazement at the messenger. "He is a young demon," he thought. Whizz! went the boy's blade into his shoulder just then. Ivan uttered a wild yell of agony and reeled back. "May the furies seize you!" he gasped. His knife dropped to the ground from his now nerveless hand. "Back! Back!" shouted the boy. He dashed in at his enemy, and with a startled cry Ivan sprang back, but only to get a blow in the neck. The knife was buried in his jugular vein, and with an expiring cry he flung up his arms. "I'm killed!" he wailed. "You've brought your fate upon yourself!" the boy replied. "Save me! I'm falling—falling!" "Were a thousand lives to be sacrificed, the Czar's message would reach its destination!" cried the excited boy. The backward wrench Stanislaus gave dislodged the keen blade, but the man was on the brink of the precipice, and the last convulsive movement he made cost him his life. The snow and earth beneath his feet gave away, and, with a fearful yell, he pitched over backwards into the yawning chasm and shot down out of sight. The Czar's messenger shuddered. "He is gone forever!" he gasped. "Never more will Ivan Stanislaus trouble me. I will go." He turned around and saw a man disappearing among the trees—a person looking like a soldier. "Ah!" the boy muttered, "a witness to what I did." Wondering who it was, he shouted to the man, but the stranger paid no attention to his hail, but kept right on. A moment later he suddenly vanished.

He recovered his weapons and walked back to the road, where he found his horse still standing.

The priest disguise laid where Ivan had thrown them, and the boy picked the things up and put them on.

"They will serve to disguise me in case I meet Perowsky," he muttered as he rode on. "And I may thus be enabled to get near enough to the wretch to send him to join his rascally companion in crime."

He urged his horse ahead, wondering where Stanislaus had procured the false beard and white wig after robbing the priests of their gowns, and turning an abrupt bend in the road, he beheld a startling sight.

Drawn up across the road was a file of soldiers.

At their head was the man who had witnessed the fall of Ivan Stanislaus over the cliff, and beside him stood a person looking like an aged priest.

That the man was Perowsky he had no doubt.

For an instant the boy hesitated.

How to proceed he did not for a moment know.

"Perowsky will see at a glance that I am not Ivan," he muttered; "and that soldier may recognize this horse as the one that stood near the scene of the fight, and he may stop me and trouble me with some ugly questions. But they see me now, and if I don't go forward they may get suspicious and come after me. There is only one course left—I must ride forward and trust to my wit to avoid danger."

With this resolve he started his horse again.

Perowsky had his glance fastened upon the boy, and as the little messenger drew nearer he saw the fugitive police chief start, glance at him closer and then advance.

"He sees that I am wearing Ivan's disguise, but that I am not his spy," the boy muttered. "I must keep cool now, or all will be lost."

A moment later he was close up to the soldiers, his nerves steeled to pass through a trying ordeal, and his hand clutching his revolver under the gown, as he watched Perowsky.

CHAPTER X.

PURSUED BY THE SOLDIERS.

As the boy drew rein in front of the soldiers, the captain accosted him.

"Hold, good father, I wish to speak to you."

"Well?" demanded the boy, in low, gruff tones.

"You are from the same place this priest comes from?"

"We both come from the same place."

"Yet he does not recognize you."

"That is very strange, as I know him to be father Perowsky."

The chief started violently, for he had recognized the horse, and was puzzled to identify the rider who wore his spy's costume.

"Where did you get that horse?" continued the captain.

"Down the road a short distance."

"Then you know of the boy and the man who fought in the woods?"

"Yes. I saw the fight."

"Ah! And the boy killed the man?"

"The man fell over the cliff."

"I saw it done, after which the boy shouted to me."

"Yes—I heard the cries."

"Did the horse belong to the duelists?"

"It belongs to the boy. But why all these questions?"

"To satisfy my curiosity, and disprove an assertion."

"An assertion? What about?"

"This priest just asserted that you are an impostor."

"Indeed? How so, may I venture to inquire, captain?"

"He declares that you are not a priest."

"And I affirm the same thing in regard to himself!"

"Then neither one of you are priests?"

"No, replied the boy coolly. "I am a messenger of the Czar!"

He flung off his beard and wig and cloak as he spoke.

"And you?" asked the captain of the soldiers, turning to the other pseudo priest. "I must have an explanation. I and my men have been sent out to hunt down a noted bandit. These disguises are mysterious. When you just met us on our way to Zagvardin, and stated that you saw this masked boy coming, we obeyed your order to pause, while I went back to keep watch, when I saw the strange man."

Peter Perowsky laughed recklessly and asked:

"Have you ever seen the chief of the St. Petersburg police?"

"No, but I have seen his picture."

"Then look at me and see if you know me."

He flung aside his disguise, and after one glance the captain cried:

"Why, you are the noted chief himself!"

"I am," said Perowsky, with a bow, "and knowing that the boy is an impostor, armed with forged passports, a thief and a scout, I have come all the way from St. Petersburg in disguise to capture him."

"He is a fugitive from justice!" cried the boy, angrily.

"Liar!" retorted Perowsky, who knew that the news of his rascality had not yet reached this obscure place. "He has murdered my companion—a detective, captain—and I demand that you have him shot down in his tracks!"

"It shall be done, sir," replied the duped officer.

"I swear to you that I am a courier of the Czar!" vehemently interposed the boy, "and I can prove it!"

"Present arms!" exclaimed the captain, ignoring him.

The boy saw at a glance that Perowsky had the advantage of him, and that the soldiers would obey him, and find out their error when too late to rectify the trouble.

It harrowed his soul with anguish.

"Aim!" continued the captain.

An evil smile of triumph lit up Perowsky's face, for he was now sure of the boy's death, and felt convinced that he could take the Czar's documents from his pockets.

Before the order to fire could be given, though, the boy plunged spurs into his horse's flanks, the beast sprang forward knocking Perowsky over, rode down the soldiers, sending several to the earth, and then was off like the wind.

It would have been useless to try to argue the question, and the boy had therefore adopted the first plan that suggested itself to his mind.

Like many other sudden ideas it ended better than if it had been elaborately arranged.

As we said before it happened at a bend in the road, and as the Czar's messenger vanished around the curve the demoralized soldiers recovered their wits enough to send several useless shots after the flying boy.

"After him!" yelled the infuriated Perowsky, picking himself up out of a snow drift. "Pursue him. A thousand rubles to the man who brings him down with a shot!"

"Our horses are tethered back in those trees, sir," said the captain, "but it will only occupy a few moments to get them, mount, and give chase to that villain!"

"Lose no time talking, but go at once!" yelled Perowsky.

He danced up and down with rage and mortification over the demerous escape of the boy, for he had been sure of seeing the Czar's messenger lying a corpse at his feet.

The soldiers rushed away, he with them, and procuring their horses they mounted the beasts and started off after the flying young fugitive.

The boy chuckled to himself as his gallant horse swept him along away from his enemies.

"I've gained another advantage of Perowsky," he muttered. "That man has the demon's own luck, and I fear will harass me to death. But I'll deliver the Czar's message if I have to crawl to Tobolsk on my hands and knees since I have gone thus far!"

He came to a fork of the road.

It was easy to see which of the two roads was used most.

"One evidently leads to Zagvardin—the other away from it. I will follow the latter," he muttered, "and therefore run less risk of being captured by those stupid soldiers."

He started his horse along the unfrequented highway, and when daylight came without any of the soldiers appearing, he stopped at a farmhouse for food, drink and rest.

His strange appearance aroused the farmer's suspicions, but the man did all that hospitality could suggest for him.

"There's a vacant bed at the head of the stairs," he said to the masked boy, "and since you are a messenger of the Czar's, you are welcome to it. I'll awaken you at midday."

Glad of a chance to rest himself, the fatigued boy saw that his

horse was cared for, and retired to bed, where he soon fell into a profound slumber.

Several hours passed by, and then he was awakened, but he did not stir, nor did he open his eyes.

He heard a stealthy footfall in the little room, the sound approaching his bed, and then it paused beside him.

Partially parting his eyelids, he saw that it was the farmer.

The man was bending over him, and a moment later the boy felt his hand on the mask on his face.

The farmer evidently wanted to see his features.

But this the boy was determined he should not do, for if Perowsky came that way the farmer could then give the chief a description by which the fugitive might calculate who he was.

The hand hardly touched his mask when he sat bolt upright.

With a cry of alarm the farmer started back, and the boy sprang out of bed and confronted him.

For an instant they stood glaring at each other.

Then the boy suddenly started as if he had been stung, and without saying a single word, he rushed past the man, dashed down-stairs and fled from the house.

This extraordinary conduct was caused by seeing through a window in back of the farmer several horsemen coming along the road toward the farm house.

They were Russian soldiers, and Perowsky was with them, and it was evident that they were trailing him, for in advance of the men came two huge Siberian bloodhounds, the beasts keenly scenting the track made by the boy.

He reached the stable, hastily saddled his horse and was just about to mount the beast, when, with a loud baying, the hounds rushed in.

Barking furiously to apprise their master that they had run the young fugitive down, they sprang toward the boy, and he drew his pistol and shot one dead.

The other leaped at his throat, knocked the pistol from his hand before he could use it again, and he flung out his hands and grasped it by the throat.

The beast was as big as he was, and the force with which it leaped knocked the boy over on the ground.

He held on to it by the throat with the energy of despair, though, and made a desperate effort to choke it to death, the animal growling and clawing at him with all its might.

Over and over upon the barn floor rolled the boy and the huge dog in a fearful struggle, and the horse became restless and nervous as it watched the conflict and began circling around and around them.

CHAPTER XI.

THE STORM IN THE MOUNTAINS.

THE intelligence of no animal in the world is as great as that of a horse, as has been exemplified times without number, and the animal ridden by the boy in red seemed to know that the bloodhound was almost more than a match for its young master.

As it circled around them, the boy imagined for an instant that the beast, having become nervous over the conflict, might trample him to death if it came too near.

Just then the boy lay on his back.

The bloodhound stood over him, its massive head held off at arm's length by sheer force of muscle, and a chill of horror ran over the boy as he saw the horse suddenly wheel around, dip its head, rear up and kick out with its hind hoofs.

The shock came like a thunderbolt.

But it hit the hound.

And knocked it across the barn.

It seemed to the boy that the horse must have done the deed in his defense, for the noble animal neighed, wheeled around again, fixed its big, soft eyes upon him, and rubbed its muzzle over his body in the friendliest manner.

The pistol laid on the floor within reach of the boy, and he seized it, and fired a shot at the yelping hound.

It was killed at the first shot.

Hastily reloading his weapon, the boy sprang into the saddle, and dashed out of the barn.

The soldiers had come to a pause before the house, and the little messenger's keen eyes soon apprised him of the fact that their horses looked jaded.

His own steed was fresh from its food and rest, and, he saw, could far outstrip his pursuers in a long dash.

They saw him the moment he appeared, and setting up a shout, they came galloping into the yard.

There was a hedge fence in back, beyond which stretched a long, rolling plain covered with snow that glistened in the sunlight.

Without the least hesitation, the boy turned his horse's nose to the fence, started it, he sprang and cleared it at a bound, and an instant later was careering over the plain like a whirlwind, going toward the east.

A defiant shout from the boy greeted the stern order to stand and surrender or get shot.

Then there came a volley.

The boy sank forward in the saddle.

A bullet had pierced his body.

He did not utter a word, but steadying himself in the saddle, he dashed on at break-neck speed.

Glancing back, he saw some of the soldiers attempt to clear the hedge on their horses, but the animals tripped and sent their riders flying over their heads in the snow.

Perowsky was wiser than the others.

He drove around to the road and kept it, as the boy was plunging along parallel with it.

The magnificent horse bestrode by the little messenger soon outstripped all the others, however, and left them so far behind that they soon disappeared from view.

The boy did not then pull rein, however, but kept on, mile after mile, to put as great a distance as he could between his pursuers and himself.

By following the road, by nightfall he came to the town of Veslensk, from whence he would have a drive to the east of two hundred and fifty miles to the Ural mountains, and then a hundred miles further into Siberia to a southern branch of the Obi river.

"I have gained at least five hours on Perowsky," he muttered as he put up at an hostelry, "and can repose in comfort until daylight tomorrow. And then I will follow yonder road to the eastward of here for the mountains."

He was up and out by break of day and started off on the worst part of his journey, a doctor having attended to his wound.

Five days passed uneventfully by, the cold so intense that the boy was half frozen despite his warm clothing, and at the end of the sixth day he was in the mountains.

A fearful snow-storm arose.

In Eastern Russia these storms are divided in three classes.

The miazet is a moderate storm of wind, rain and snow.

A sanjot is something like a snowy tornado.

But the worst of all is the winga, and that was the kind of a storm in which the little messenger found himself.

An icy shower of snow had come down, driving so thick and so horizontally through the air that it was impossible to withstand it, while it was equally as useless to drive before it.

The wind shrieked with a fearful noise, circled in huge whirlwinds, gathered up trees by their roots, huge rocks from their beds and every other object exposed to its fury, tossed them high up with wild violence and hurled them to and fro in the air.

The boy knew what the forerunner of the hurricane was, and tied his horse and himself to two separate trees that grew under the sheltering lee of an elevation.

A chill of horror struck the boy.

He had encountered the foe he dreaded most, for these storms last several days, and he had no shelter but the hill, his food was all gone and death stared him in the face.

There was a forest of fir-trees opposite where he stood, but when the fearful blast struck it every tree was uprooted like blades of straw, whirled up in the freezing air hundreds of feet, and were whirled miles and miles away.

"Heaven help me," the boy groaned. "I fear that I shall never reach Tobolsk now. The winga will level barns, houses and churches in its path, destroy herds of cattle, and kill many people."

The wind bellowed and roared and boomed like a battery of artillery in the battlefield, and the hail and snow beat down and was whirled about in huge blinding clouds that lent a misty appearance to everything.

A cold, frozen feeling was overpowering the boy, and the snow kept piling up around him in a great heap.

His horse was then hidden from view.

Louder the wind raved, fiercer grew the storm, and then with a yell like an army of demons the whirlwind struck the boy with one full stroke, and he was torn from his lashings.

He uttered a plaintive cry, and tried to hold on to the tree, but it was torn from its bed, carried up in the air with him, and hurled through space down the side of the mountain, until at last, after grazing above the ground for some distance it finally struck the earth.

The storm raged on over the gnarled trunk of the tree and the snow heaped itself all around it.

Amid the branches there laid the senseless figure of the little messenger, half buried in the snow.

His eyes were closed, but a genial warmth came from the primitive bed that had infused some life in his veins, and made him breathe.

But he had fallen a victim to the storm, for his life was almost gone, and nothing but the destructive path of the storm remained to tell what caused it.

His horse was gone.

Poor beast, and kind friend as it had been to him it perished with many other of God's creatures in the hurricane.

Several hours passed by after the storm had swept slowly along on its course, and then two Calmuks came by and saw the boy.

They soon discovered his peculiar appearance, marveled at it very much, and finding that he was yet alive, they took him away to their encampment, where he was put in a tent.

The camp was made up of a caravan of Russians, Poles, Hungarians, Tartars, Cossacks and Armenians, and these people, men women and children, had just escaped the storm.

They were traveling from Usilitzka to Berezov in Siberia, and were then on the eastern side of the great Ural steppes, and were heading for the Sosva river on which they hoped to get transported.

Nearly a week passed by before they struck camp though, as they had no desire to fall in with another storm.

In the meantime a Cossack woman had taken care of the little messenger, and managed to restore him to his senses.

He had been badly used up by his rough treatment, although he was fortunate enough to escape with no bones broken, and by the time the camp was broken up he was ready for travel.

His mask had been taken from his face for the first time by a stranger when the Cossack woman removed it, but he put it on again when he set out on the last stage of his journey.

The boy felt badly over the loss of his horse, but as he was lucky enough to have saved his money, he bought a Tartar barb from one of the men in the caravan, and not waiting for the slow moving train he set out ahead of them.

None of the people knew who he was, where he came from, where he was going, or what object he had in view.

He liberally rewarded them all, and when he left them he had their best wishes, and a good guide to find his way to Tobolsk.

"I'll save the city now, if God spares me!" he muttered, as he started.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MESSAGE.

"FIRE! Fire! Fire!"

It was a thrilling cry that rang through the bleak Siberian town as the shades of night fell upon the scene.

Tobolsk was made up of exiles, the worst of whom worked in the lead mines under the cruelest of taskmasters for the crimes they had committed in the bounds of civilization; but it was a large town and was under the municipality of a governor.

Paul Perowsky, the governor, was in the street when that dreadful cry rang out, and the big man started and glanced around uneasily, for a terrible fear entered his mind.

"Can the Polish insurrectionists have started their attempt to burn down the city before I give them leave?" he muttered.

A man ran up to the governor and he stopped him.

"Citizen, where is the fire?" he demanded.

"Ah, your excellency, is it you? The fire? Oh! it is outside the town.

"How far?"

"A mile, sir."

"Then why does that fool alarm Tobolsk?"

"To call out people to extinguish the flames, your excellency."

"Humph! Well, it is customary."

"It is, your excellency."

"What is burning—a house?"

"Worse than that. A tan yard."

"Ah! You may go."

The man hurried on, and the governor bent his steps homeward, pondering deeply over his money-making plans.

"Why does not my brother apprise me as to whether he intends to engage in my plot or not?" he mused. "Already too much time has been wasted. He says if he agrees that the signal for the revolt shall be his arrival here."

He reached his house and entered.

"A man to see your excellency," said a servant.

"Who is it?" gruffly demanded the governor.

"I do not know. He is in the parlor."

"Tell him I am too much engaged—that I have no time——"

"He says it is very important, may it please your excellency."

"Fool! Do as I tell you. Is not my word law here?"

"It is, your excellency, but——"

"Confound your persistence! The man doubtless bribed you to——"

Just then the parlor door opened and a man stepped in the hall.

"Paul!" exclaimed he.

"My brother!" cried the amazed governor.

In another moment the two rascally brothers were embracing each other before the amazed servant, then they entered the parlor.

"What news?" asked the fugitive chief, anxiously.

"None whatsoever."

"Have no messengers from the Czar arrived here?"

"None at all."

"Thank God!"

"Ha! the plot is exposed?"

"It is, Paul."

"Great Heaven, we are lost!"

"Not yet."

"But if the Czar knows——"

"He has only sent one messenger here——"

"But he has not arrived."

"Luckily for you he hasn't."

"You speak warningly."

"And with cause. He has a message to the soldiery exposing the whole plot and ordering your death."

"But where is this messenger?"

"Probably dead," replied Perowsky.

"How do you know?"

"I go by the evidence. He had a tremendous start of me, and should have been here at least a week ago."

"Then you are in time."

"So far we are safe. But the blow must be struck to-night."

"To-night?"

"At once. Suppose the messenger were to arrive to-night?"

"Tell me all that has happened to you."

Peter Parowsky detailed all that he passed through, to which his brother listened in silence, and concluded by saying:

"During the trip over the Ural mountains, I heard that a fearful storm swept over the region traversed by the boy, for I discovered the remains of his horse. He too must have perished. Still, I do not count on probabilities. No time must be lost, lest by some accident our plans should be spoiled."

"You are right," replied the governor. "You are a refugee, and I will be no better when we have consummated the plot. Hence the quicker it is ended, the sooner we will get away, and the less our chances of punishment will be."

"Have you got the money?"

"I have got half of it."

"Good! Now how are we to rid the town of the soldiery?"

"Fate has played into our hands. Did you hear of the fire?"

"The tan-yard outside of the city? Yes!"

"Then it shall be turned to our account."

"What do propose doing?"

"I shall summon the lieutenant of the guard and dispatch him there with orders to guard the place with every soldier in the town, to prevent robbery and spread of the fire."

"A good suggestion."

"Once he is gone, it will occupy but a few minutes to apprise the Poles that they can begin their operations. I will have a droschky and team in readiness to carry us off."

"We go to Warsaw from here?"

"Exactly—to get the other half of the bribe money."

Parowsky felt jubilant, for it seemed as if they could not fail.

The governor rang a hand bell, and a servant appeared.

"Hasten to the barracks with this note," said the governor.

He handed the servant a summons for the lieutenant, and the man took it, bowed, and silently withdrew from the room.

"You feel confident of success?" said Perowsky.

"There is nothing can mar our plans."

"How are the exiles to get away?"

"In sledges which their friends have in readiness."

"But if they meet the soldiers——"

"They won't, as the soldiers will be at a point opposite that direction by which they will leave the burning city."

"Have all the fire mines been laid?"

"Every house is drenched with oil. It only requires a torch to set the whole town in a blaze in half an hour."

"Direct me to the quarters of the exiles—I will warn them."

"Not yet. Let us first get rid of the soldiers."

"Very well—you know best how to act."

"In the meantime, have some of this liquor."

Perowsky was chilled and tired, and gladly availed himself of the liquid, for he wanted to brace up his nerves.

There was a fearful ordeal to go through, and iron-nerved as he was, he inwardly trembled over the uncertainty of the result, as it involved all his future peace and comfort.

A short time afterwards, so great was his excitement, he had drunk nearly half a bottle of brandy, and being unaccustomed to it, the fumes went to his brain.

When he had taken the last libation, a knock sounded at the door.

"Come in!" exclaimed the governor, gruffly.

The servant entered.
 "Lieutenant Maczowski, your excellency," he announced.
 The brothers glanced significantly at each other an instant.
 "Usurp him in," said the governor.
 The servant went out, and a moment later a fine-looking gentleman in the uniform of the imperial army entered.
 "Your excellency sent for me?" he asked, bowing.
 "You are to marshal all the men in the barracks and proceed without delay beyond the city to the fire," said the governor, authoritatively.
 "Have the flames extinguished and guard the place until daylight, then you may return."
 "Pardon me, your excellency, but I cannot do it."
 "What?" roared the amazed governor, bounding to his feet.
 "It is utterly impossible, sir," replied the lieutenant, coolly.
 "But, sir, I command it."
 "Which makes not the least difference."
 "How dare you refuse to obey me, sir?"
 "Simply because I hold you a prisoner."
 "A prisoner?" gasped the governor, and Perowsky turned pale.
 "Exactly so. This house is guarded by the troops. Your plot is exposed. If you resist arrest I shall shoot you."
 "But what is the meaning of this outrage?"
 The lieutenant coughed, the door opened, and some one entered.
 "The boy in red!" yelled Perowsky, losing all control of himself.
 "And this message which he brought me just now from the Czar," said the lieutenant, holding up the paper, "explains the whole plot and is your death warrant."
 Had a bomb exploded between them the two conspiring brothers could not have been more startled.

CHAPTER XIII.

CONCLUSION.

Peter Perowsky saw at a glance that the plot was foiled, and a terrible fear of the consequence assailed him when he thought of the Czar's wrath.
 As for the governor, a panic seized him.
 He burst into a cold sweat and began to tremble as if with the ague.
 Dropping down upon his knees in the middle of the floor, he held his clasped hands imploringly and cried in trembling tones:
 "For God's sake spare me. I will confess all."
 "Then you admit your guilt without trial?" asked the lieutenant.
 "Yes, I am guilty. Let me escape and—"
 "Silence!" thundered the frowning officer.
 "Mercy!" whined the cowering man piteously.
 "I shall execute the Czar's command."
 "And that is?"
 "To shoot you down like a dog!"
 A terrible groan burst from the wretched man's lips, for he knew that only his death could atone the offense he had committed.
 Military law such as governs Russia was stern and exacting, the Czar's commands as absolute as a king's, and the sense of duty we have mentioned before was inborn in all his subjects.
 "May I not stand a trial?" gasped the horrified governor.
 "No. We have already put the plotting prisoners in jail, and by torturing them with the lashes of the knout we wrung a full confession from their lips. They condemn you and this villainous wretch, your brother. You are doomed!"
 "Curse that messenger!"
 "May God bless him! But for his bravery, his courage in carrying out the Czar's commands, your diabolical plot would have succeeded. He braved every danger, faced death in a thousand forms, and suffered like a martyr to accomplish his mission. Balked at every turn by that accursed fugitive, he overcame all obstacles and has triumphed at last!"
 "May the arch fiend fly away with him!"
 The lieutenant drew out a huge navy revolver from his belt and aimed it at the writhing man with a steady hand.
 "Pray," he exclaimed. "Pray for two minutes!"
 "Spare me! Oh, God—spare me!"
 "Pray, I tell you, before it is too late."
 "May the fiend curse you for—"
 Bang! went the pistol.
 "Oh, I am—" yelled the governor.
 But the sentence was never completed, for he toppled over dead.
 The bullet of justice had pierced his brain.
 "To the Czar's name!" solemnly exclaimed the lieutenant.
 "He is dead!" said the boy in red.
 Peter Perowsky beheld with feelings of horror what occurred.
 He cast one frightened glance upon the stiffening corpse of his alleged brother, with one dash he reached a window, as agilely as a panther he sprang head first through the glass, and amid a loud jingling he vanished out in the street.
 "Gone!" exclaimed the little messenger in startled tones.
 "After the guards on that side of the house," said the lieutenant.
 "Then I shall pursue him until he is found."
 "Have a care lest he—"
 But ere the warning was finished the boy had jumped through the window and was after Peter Perowsky.
 The door had opened out in the street.
 Just then a dozen soldiers appeared.

"Cover that man!" exclaimed the boy.
 The soldiers brought their carbines to bear on Perowsky.
 "Aim—steady!" continued the boy.
 The soldiers obeyed.
 "Fire!"
 A thundering volley pealed out, followed by a wild cry of pain.
 Perowsky staggered, flung up his arms, and fell to the ground.
 The boy rushed over to his side and knelt down.
 One glance at the man showed him that Perowsky's body was riddled with bullets, and that the man was dying fast.
 The soldiers grouped around the man and the boy.
 For an instant Perowsky lay writhing convulsively with one hand clasped to his bosom, and then he opened his starting eyes, and his glaring glance rested upon the little messenger.
 He essayed to speak, but it was useless.
 The words died away on his lips in a deep groan of agony.
 For an instant he fought off death.
 He was nerved up to the last pitch of energy.
 Suddenly seizing the mask, he tore it from the boy's face.
 An eager look overspread his pale face as he glanced intently at the boy's features, and then he hoarsely cried:
 "Harry Morton—son—of—the—American—consul!"
 "A true blue Yankee boy all through!" said the boy, proudly.
 Down fell Perowsky upon his back.
 He pointed at the daring little American, his eyes starting from their sockets, and then his arm began to droop—droop lower and lower, until it finally fell heavily to his side.
 He rolled over on his back.
 Several hard gasps and a low gurgle followed.
 He stretched out at full length—stiff.
 Peter Perowsky was dead.
 He had fallen a victim to his greed and evil passions.
 The lieutenant joined the little messenger presently.
 "God's will be done!" he exclaimed. "The Czar is obeyed! The city is saved! You are the one we have to thank for it!"
 He silently shook hands with the boy, but it meant volumes.

Two months later and summer was upon the beautiful city of St. Petersburg, the gay capital was almost deserted, but the emperor was at the Winter Palace attending to some business.
 A servant entered his private study.
 "Your highness, an important caller to see you," he announced.
 "What name?" demanded the Czar.
 "He gave none. He is a mere boy."
 "Admit him, if it is urgent."
 A moment later the boy in red stepped into the room.
 Still wearing the strange suit, but now unmasked, and showing a handsome face and resolute blue eyes to the sovereign, he lightly advanced to the Czar.
 "Harry Morton!" exclaimed the emperor, in surprised tones.
 "Just returned from Siberia, your majesty," said the boy.
 "Ah! I am glad to see you safe."
 "Thank you. My mission is done."
 "Tobolsk is safe?"
 "As ever."
 "Perowsky?"
 "Is dead."
 "And you?"
 "Healthy."
 "Sit down. Detail your adventures."
 The young Yankee boy did so.
 When he finished the Czar almost wept with emotion.
 "Such fidelity!" he exclaimed. "It is wonderful."
 "And I will now leave you, since my work is done, as I must change my clothes and see my father. My fidelity was no more than what was due to you. I have not forgotten how unselfishly you once saved my life at the peril of your own by protecting me from the bombs of a nihilist gang in the streets. My return to St. Petersburg was a pleasure, relays of horses meeting the carriage Maczowski provided me with all along the route. I have now recovered from all I suffered getting to Tobolsk with your message."
 "Do not think of repayment," earnestly said the Czar. "The service you so voluntarily rendered me is incalculable. I shall never forget it. I said I would magnificently reward you. I never break my word. To-morrow you shall receive the title of a nobleman. My realm and the world shall ring with your praises, and fame, fortune and honor are yours."
 Shortly afterward the boy left the Czar.
 His father had been apprised of what he did, and was proud of his boy's wonderful deed.
 It fact, it was the American minister the extreme patronage of the Czar while his term of office lasted in the Russian capital, and the boy was his friend and near.
 Harry Morton returned to his native land, he was a millionaire and the Czar's prime favorite.
 He went with regret that he left the Russian capital.
 He had sweeter associations, and he came to it.
 He had married a charming girl and settled down to a life of ease and comfort.
 He was now a man in general.
 He was now a man in general.
 He was now a man in general.

[THE END.]

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